

leh 301.co1w:
brother from another planet:
african-american speculative fiction
spring 2007
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from the "fantastic voyage" narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through the exotic imperial romances of the nineteenth, and up to the science fiction of the twentieth century, imaginative literature has been a means – like any mythology – of mediating between the domestic and that which lies at and beyond the limits of the knowledge.

adam lively, *masks: blackness, race, and imagination* (2000)

no wonder we need aliens.

no wonder we're so good at creating aliens.

no wonder we so often project alienness onto one another.

octavia butler, "the monophobic response," 1995

course description

In an interview in the *African-American Review*, African-American science fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson asserts that "science fiction has always been a subversive literature" because it forces the reader to "think twice and thrice about a whole bunch of things in relation to each other: sexuality, race, class, color, history." Hopkinson here provides the questions which will animate our course: is there a distinct tradition of black speculative fiction? How might a culture that has, in Hopkinson's words, "been on the receiving end of the colonization glorified in some science fiction" negotiate and politicize the genre? Does black speculative fiction (defined here to encompass science fiction, fantasy, cyberpunk, Afro-futurism etc.) cause one, in fact, "to think twice and thrice" about race, class, and sexuality? Finally, does the tradition challenge our basic assumptions of identity, or does it ultimately work to normalize them? We will begin with a general consideration of the fantastic in literature. Using supplementary materials from postcolonial and feminist theory, as well as a consideration of the traditions of travel writing and utopian/dystopian thought, we will look at how black writers, filmmakers and musicians have used speculative methods to defamiliarize our assumptions about "familiar" social issues.

required texts (available in the bookstore)

Of One Blood, Pauline Hopkins (1901-1902)

Black No More, George Schuyler (1931)

Trouble on Triton, Samuel R. Delany (1976)

Wild Seed, Octavia Butler (1980)

Brown Girl in the Ring, Nalo Hopkinson (1998)

requirements

- **papers: 75%**

Responsive readers imagine themselves in a dialogue with the author and, in doing so, often become authors themselves. Because this course fulfills the writing-intensive requirement, you can expect to write a lot here. This semester, you will be required to reflect, in short (1-2 page) response papers, on three of the texts we study together (the due dates of each of these are noted in the syllabus). We will discuss in greater detail what I expect from these response papers, but it is important to note that the papers should build on one another. In other words, through the writing process you should begin to identify particular interests you personally have about the texts we read, and to explore those interests with growing mastery and focus.

Your response papers will then provide the seeds for three structured, persuasive papers of varying lengths. The first two, one on a single text and the second a comparative argument, will respond to personalized prompts that I will provide each of you based on the interests you reveal in your earlier work. Ultimately, your sixth, and final, paper will grow organically from all the writing you have done over the course of the semester. This time, you will provide your own prompt: you will be required to submit a prospectus outlining a question related to African-American speculative fiction. After the prospectus is approved, you will write a formal, 8-10 page persuasive paper which utilizes research to propose an original “answer” to this question. We will outline the specific requirements later in the semester.

The paper grades will be broken down approximately as follows:

response paper 1: 5%
response paper 2: 5%
response paper 3: 10%

paper 4: 15%
paper 5: 15%

final paper prospectus: 5%
final paper: 20%

- **in-class presentation: 15%**

We as a class compose a community of learners. As such, we are all accountable for what we learn and how our classroom operates. To this end, each student in the class will be responsible for leading class discussion on one of our readings. Your goal in this presentation is to facilitate discussion in whatever way you think is most useful. Thus, you may pose any provocative questions or ideas to the class, share background information you have discovered that you believe will be helpful in our endeavor to understand a given text, or bring up any connections you see between this text and others we have discussed. Audio-visual aids are both welcome and encouraged; you may bring in images or television/film clips that shed light on the issues with which we are grappling, as long as you are prepared to discuss how they are related to our readings. I am happy to discuss your plans beforehand if you are unsure about your presentation ideas.

After you present, you are also required to write up a one-page summary of the class discussion, which you must hand in to me by the following class meeting. This is, again, an informal assignment, but it needs to be specific: while I do want you to reflect on how the discussion progressed as a whole, I also want you to note particular comments and interpretations. Did the discussion go the way you expected? Did any answers or interpretations surprise you? Did you think the questions you asked were successful conversation-starters? Why or why not? You will not receive a presentation grade if the reflection paper is not submitted.

If you miss the date of your presentation without being excused, you will receive an automatic 'F' on this project.

- **miscellaneous in-class activities, participation & attendance:10%**

student responsibilities

Attendance: As with any college course, it is essential to be in class, to be on time for class, and to complete all assigned work. You will not pass the course if you miss more than four classes. Students will not be allowed into the classroom more than fifteen minutes after our session has begun, as it is disruptive to the entire group.

If you miss a class for any reason, make sure you contact a classmate in order to get the assignments and cover the material missed.

Cell phones need to be turned off while you are in the classroom. It is disrespectful to your fellow students to interrupt them by allowing your phone to ring or, worse, to text message or leave the class in order to chat on the phone while someone is speaking. If I see your cell phone out during class, I will ask you to leave; this is embarrassing for both me and you, so I appreciate everyone's cooperation before we get to that point.

Participation: As I stated earlier, our classroom is a student-centered learning environment, which means that you are as responsible for making the meaning of this course as I am. The success of the class, then, depends on your participation. You have agency in what we discuss and learn; utilize that opportunity so we all get the most out of our time together. I expect each and every one of you to come in prepared to share your own interesting ideas, questions, and arguments. It is crucial to our learning community that we *all* share our unique perceptions of the reading. However, while we will almost certainly encounter some uncomfortable discussions about the concepts of race and/or sexuality, it is also crucial that we do so in a respectful and open-minded way to ensure we all remain comfortable sharing our views.

Papers: All papers must be typed and double spaced. Please paginate and use a font similar to Times New Roman size 12. Make handwritten corrections if necessary. I allow each of you **one excused lateness**. Please use this extension with discretion, understanding that the pace of the course is fast and it may be difficult to keep up with coursework if you fall behind on your papers. When you use this one excused lateness, the paper is due one week after the original due date. After you use your extension, I will not accept any other late papers, so choose wisely.

Plagiarism is a serious offense! Plagiarism, as defined by the MLA Handbook, is the "act of using another person's ideas or expressions in your writing without acknowledging the source. To

plagiarize is to give the impression that you have written or thought something that you have in fact borrowed from someone else.” **Evidence of plagiarism will result in an automatic “F” on your paper; no excuses.** Disciplinary action may also be taken. Don’t risk it! If you need any clarification about what constitutes plagiarism, please talk to me before submitting your paper.

Students with Disabilities: In order to receive accommodations, you must contact Lehman College’s Special Student Services in Shuster Hall. They will contact me to arrange for the recommended accommodations.

Please see me if you ever have any issues concerning the class. As this is a literature course, the reading load is quite heavy and the pace fast. I am always happy to discuss any concerns you may have if you feel you are falling behind, or if you’d like my help conceptualizing or writing a paper. Please talk to me after class, drop by during office hours, or email me to schedule a meeting time.

Finally, welcome to the course! I look forward to having a productive and enlightening semester!

syllabus

note: The syllabus is tentative and subject to change. Be forewarned that I very well may supplement your primary readings with secondary material not yet listed, as I see fit.

date	class discussion/ reading due	writing due
tuesday, 30 january	welcome to the class! introductions & review of syllabus	
thursday, 2 february	“The Road Not Taken” by Lerone Bennett, “Colonizing the Universe” by Greg Grewell and “Blacks as Dark Matter” by Sheree Thomas (all handouts)	
tuesday, 6 february	“Man-made Wonder” from <i>the Artificial Paradise</i> by Sharona Ben-Tov and “Black to the Future” by Walter Mosley (all handouts)	
thursday, 8 february	<i>Of One Blood</i> by Pauline Hopkins, pp. forthcoming	
tuesday, 13 february	<i>Of One Blood</i> by Pauline Hopkins, pp. forthcoming	
thursday, 15 february	no class - classes follow a monday schedule.	
tuesday, 20 february	<i>Of One Blood</i> by Pauline Hopkins, pp. forthcoming and “‘That Just Kills Me:’ Black Militant Near-Future Fiction” by Kali Tal (handout)	response paper #1
thursday, 22 february	“the Comet” by W.E.B. Du Bois and secondary materials TBA (handouts)	
tuesday, 27 february	<i>Black No More</i> by George Schuyler, pp. xix-56	
thursday, 1 march	<i>Black No More</i> by George Schuyler, pp. 57-112	
tuesday, 6 march	<i>Black No More</i> by George Schuyler, pp. 113-180	response paper #2
thursday, 8 march	film screening: <i>Space is the Place</i>	
	film screening & discussion: <i>Space is the Place</i>	

tuesday, 13 march	plus: "Rhythm Travel" by Amiri Baraka and secondary material TBA (handouts)	
thursday, 15 march	<i>Trouble on Triton</i> by Samuel Delany, pp. 1-43	response paper #3 (on <i>Space Is the Place</i>)
tuesday, 20 march	<i>Trouble on Triton</i> by Samuel Delany, pp. 45-116	
thursday, 22 march	<i>Trouble on Triton</i> by Samuel Delany, pp. 117-184	
tuesday, 27 march	<i>Trouble on Triton</i> by Samuel Delany, pp. 185-233	
thursday, 29 march	<i>Trouble on Triton</i> by Samuel Delany, pp. 235-312	
tuesday, 3 april	no class - enjoy your spring break!	
thursday, 5 april	no class - enjoy your spring break!	
tuesday, 10 april	no class - enjoy your spring break!	
thursday, 12 april	<i>Wild Seed</i> by Octavia Butler, pp. forthcoming	paper #4
tuesday, 17 april	<i>Wild Seed</i> by Octavia Butler, pp. forthcoming	
thursday, 19 april	film screening: <i>Cosmic Slop</i>	
tuesday, 24 april	film screening & discussion: <i>Cosmic Slop</i> plus: "The Space Traders" by Derrick Bell and "Futurist Fiction and Fantasy: the 'Racial' Establishment" by Gregory E. Rutledge (both handouts)	final paper prospectus
thursday, 26 april	"Separation Anxiety" by Evie Shockley and "Buddy Bolden" by Kalamu ya Salaam (both handouts)	
tuesday, 1 may	<i>Brown Girl in the Ring</i> by Nalo Hopkinson, pp. 1-82	paper #5
thursday, 3 may	<i>Brown Girl in the Ring</i> by Nalo Hopkinson, pp. 83-154	
tuesday, 8 may	<i>Brown Girl in the Ring</i> by Nalo Hopkinson, pp. 155-247	
thursday, 10 may	class on comic books: handouts forthcoming	
tuesday, 15 may	last day of class! "The Woman in the Wall" by Steven Barnes and secondary material TBA (handouts)	final paper!